

Firebird Nested in Darkness

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Verse One: Why Do They Call it The Witch Road?

Amy Welcher hated the past week. The past week had wronged her, and if it were possible to kick a week or lecture it, she would have already done that. First, her boyfriend and let 'bros' take priority over her, his girlfriend. It happened all the time in the novels Amy read and inevitably led to the guy either turning dudebro evil or strip clubs- which really amounted to the same thing. Guys always wanted to play around, Cosmopolitan taught Amy this at a very young age, and she started dating Harley quite deliberately because he wasn't that sort of guy. Harley was cute enough- not boy band cute, but certainly college athlete cute- and so conscientious. If only he didn't constantly sideline for his man crush.

After man-crush lost his job- no surprise there- and Harley hadn't done what he was supposed to do if he'd watched any Romantic Comedies; Amy had decided to use the tried and true method of making the man punish himself. The silent treatment, only just enough breaks in the silence to remind him what he was missing.

And then Harley stopped answering her texts.

Or, more accurately, Amy admitted to herself, his phone started bouncing her texts back as undeliverable. Amy couldn't tell if he was blocking her number somehow or if he was in an area where there was no service. Amy had kept herself deliberately ignorant on things where others could help her, it provided her with power over the people who needed to impress her and she liked that. But Harley always answered texts. Reliable was practically his middle name.

And so Amy went down to the house. She found the door to the basement suite barre with yellow police tape. She found a white van out front. And when she approached the door she was stopped by man in a business suit who introduced himself as Agent White and demanded she come with him.

He had told her she wasn't under arrest, but hadn't allowed her to leave. He had told her that she wasn't being interrogated, but wouldn't stop asking pointed questions. He had told her that she wasn't being charged with anything, but took her driver's license and recorded everything.

The 'not an interrogation' had lasted for over twenty-four hours she thought. During which time she had told them how she met Harley, about Marion the freak man-crush, about their fight, about their entire relationship outside the bed room. She had tried demanding a phone call. She had tried being flirty. She had tried getting angry, even stomping her feet. She had tried crying, but her secret weapon seemed wasted in the men in black and white suits who just kept peppering her with questions. Finally she was left, head down in the interrogation room, actually crying. The whole process had drained her, and she was unable to answer any more questions. And as she tried to answer questions, she instead found herself sobbing into her shirt sleeve.

At some point they let her go. She was so exhausted from the lack of sleep and constant questions that she couldn't remember when they had actually let her go. She wandered out in to the blinding white light of day, and felt like she were performing some sort of horrible walk of shame.

Amy put one foot in front of the other carefully for several blocks before she noticed that she was heading back towards Harley's house. She tried to think why. She was exhausted and depressed. She knew her make up must look awful from all the crying, but hadn't mustered the courage to check since exiting the building. Had she been in a police station? She suddenly couldn't remember, and looking around could find the building that she had exited from just moments earlier. Silent glass towers loomed around her on all sides impassively.

What should she do? The question sat uncomfortably in her skull, an unfamiliar house guest with unfamiliar demands. Amy knew that the world was evil and petty from movies and television, from Oprah and Cosmo, from Facebook and Soap Operas. She had armed herself against that with the best weapons she could find. The thing she had prized most had been her boyfriend. He could act out on occasion, but compared with the boyfriends on display on daytime television, he'd always acted pretty damned excellent- even counting his stupid best friend fixation.

The men in suits had accused her boyfriend of some pretty awful things, kidnapping, fleeing the authorities, potential assaults and murders and she couldn't remember what else. Amy knew Harley did not match the person they described. Grudgingly, Amy admitted that neither did Marion. She didn't think of Marion as evil, just incompetent on one hand and dangerous competition for her on the other hand.

Neither guy had the capacity to be as evil as the men in black and white suits had described in Amy's opinion.

Amy felt vaguely guilty, and she didn't appreciate the feeling. Thinking back, Amy wasn't sure what she had told the men in the suits. This fact began to worry Amy. She faced the decision to believe Harley could do the horrible things they had said, or that the men in the suits had lied to her. Amy choice to believe that they had lied to her, which meant anything that she had told them might be used to hurt Harley, her Harley.

She was still walking, she noticed, and still heading to Harley's. She wasn't sure if the tape and the men would still be there. The thought creeped her out, she wanted to turn and walk in any other direction. But, she kept walking towards the house. She suddenly realized how much she missed him, Harley; and not as a weapon against a petty universe (although she could really use a hug and a snuggle right now). Amy missed Harley for Harley, and was suddenly very angry at somebody, she wasn't sure who to blame, for their separation.

But the creepy men who had practically arrested her without a trial or a phone call or anything might still be at the house, and she slowed her pace as fear began to creep in. Besides, why was she going to the house? Harley wasn't there. And the creepy men in suits would have taken anything useful that might tell where they went. But she kept walking. Amy started to notice that she was walking against her better judgement, like some bimbo in a bad horror movie. She deliberately turned and faced away from Harley's place and, to her shock and horror, found herself walking backwards in the same direction as before.

Amy turned back around to avoid tripping over the fur pom-poms on her shoes and found herself staring at a grubby looking man with a grubby looking big dog, both standing in front of her grinning like fools.

"I don't carry cash." She said automatically.

The man drew a familiar object from behind his back and offered it to Amy, "That without that you don't."

Amy stared, "My tote bag."

"Useful summoning anchor too." The man said, "I'm Grub and this is Mung Bean, my dog and partner in crime. We're wizards and we need your help finding your lost boy and his partner before the bad guys in suits do."

Amy listened to the stream of insanity with growing apprehension, "I will call the cops." She finally said.

Grub grinned, "And I will go looking for your boy. Suit yourself."

Amy paused. And Grub, expanded. Still a dirty grubby man in poorly fitted clothes he was now bigger and more imposing, and Amy suddenly realized how slightly the man had been deliberately carrying himself- a mask now discarded.

"We all wear masks. I understand that. You wear a mask as armour to protect yourself, because you think you're in the horrible small petty little stories that you've been reading all of your life. But you're in those stories. I'm giving you a chance. You can choose to be the selfish self-absorbed girlfriend that the story has cast you as so far, just minor obstacle for the first few chapters. Or, you can choose to be part of the dark horse ensemble; the team that backs up the heroes and helps them win the day. This isn't a melodrama, this is epic fantasy adventure. Choose now, because I don't have all day."

"I could scream," She said.

"You could, but you don't need to. I'm going to do anything to you. I'm offering you a chance to help somebody you care about. And I think beneath that carefully composed mask, you do care. And I think you know that given how much you told the bad guys, reaching your boy is time sensitive matter. We have to hurry. Do you want to help, or you do want to go back into your bubble?"

"You don't know a thing about me."

"I know plenty about you. I just used your little bag there as a focus to summon you here. I picked all sorts of stuff including who gave you that bag, which tells me an awful lot about why you're so scared. I'd have burned the bag myself." He said.

Amy dropped the bag. Her mouth hung open.

"You can't know that."

"I do know it. And now you know that you aren't in the story that you thought you were in. The old rules don't apply. You have to adapt if you want to go anywhere from here besides back into your little angry defensive shell of denial."

Amy was about to say something angry and terribly clever in response when Grub reached out and plucked a dandelion seed from the air and gently wrapped his huge hands around it.

"You don't have to be a caterpillar in a cocoon, Amy," He said softly, "you can be a butterfly."

He opened his hands, and a painted lady butterfly fluttered from his grasp.

Amy suddenly had a thousand questions, but between Grubs words and his apparent conjuring of the butterfly, Amy found him hard to question.

"So, you want my help saving my boyfriend?"

"Little miss, neither you nor I are big players. We are meddlers, named extras. Hopefully we are the comic relief, because that boosts our survivability. Be glad you're the girl friend, that will improve your chances of survival."

"Unless he needs some grief to motivate him. I know what happens to love interests in stories written for boys."

"How do you know this a boy's story?"

"It's a quest."

"Yes, it is and your boy is neck deep in danger right now. I can't get a bead on him. But he helped me, and I pay my debts. So I'm going to help him."

"What do you mean he's in danger?"

"Did those guys in the suits and sunglasses seem like they wanted to give him a raise?"

"But what does that or this have to do with anything?"

"It has everything to do with everything. Your boy is one of the big players in our story and if we don't keep him safe, things are going to keep getting worse for everybody. And, I suspect this is more relevant, if we don't help him he's probably going to die and die slowly and painfully."

"If goes and dies," Amy said, "I'm going to kill him."

"Hah!" He laughed a single loud flat syllable, "We'd best move before the vulture sees us. I don't much care for quislings." He thumbed his hand back at Harley's house and Amy spotted the kneeling figure of Mrs. Critchwood in the front yard with a Japanese trowel doing violence to her lawn and what she must have perceived as weeds.

"Why would care what Mrs. Critchwood sees? She's just a mean old lady who's easy to manipulate." Amy asked.

"You're going to learn that in a story there are very few little characters. We all get recycled sooner or later to serve the narrative."

They walked briskly away, and Grub launched into an enthusiastic narrative regarding what he planned for them to do. He kept referring to 'the story' and Amy wasn't certain what he meant when he said that, but didn't want to look foolish by asking obvious questions. The idea seemed to be that they were living a real version of old fairy tales or legends or classic quests, or maybe those things were a reflection of whatever they were doing. But in either case (or possibly something else if she were way off base), people seemed to fill certain roles in the story, big roles and little roles, and then enact the story with the winners getting to dictate how the story looks next time, or something like that.

Amy still wasn't sure that Grub wasn't simply a con man who was good enough at slight of hand and cold reading to pull a convincing job, but something in her gut told her to trust him, and that didn't happen often- especially with men. And the other man she trusted seemed to need help, even if she was still furious with him, and Grub seemed to honestly want to help. So she kept listening to his insanity.

As far as Amy could tell, there were two teams fighting for control of the story: a group that Grub kept referring to as the Tribe, and a group that Grub called the Hungry Empire. No points for guessing who the bad guys were, Amy noted to herself.

"No, me and all Wizards side with the Tribe, because we aren't fools," Grub said, "But we've been losing this fight for centuries, and Wizards and Witches have started stealing some of our power from the empire. Use the master's tools to take down the master's house so to speak."

"Playing dirty?" Amy asked.

"Yup. The heroes play big and dramatic up in the sky. The little guys fight in the mud. We steal and borrow power from wherever we can get it, our enemies, our allies, gods and angels, devils and demons and ancient eldritch abominations, you name it. We're power parasites."

"You're not selling this to me. That is not sexy."

"It can be. Think of it like this. If your car breaks down and you have to get it to the dealership, do you want to push it yourself or call a tow truck?"

"The tow truck obviously."

"Our magic is like calling a cosmic tow truck."

"A tow truck is sexy?"

"It's sexier than walking the Witch Road on foot."

Verse Two: Threshold Guardian

Harley listened to Maia as she sat on the dirt by the cold campfire quietly crying. He couldn't blame her, she hadn't even hit puberty, and now her mother was dead, her brother was catatonic. She was running for her life from her father on the advice of some possibly mythical witchdoctor, and the one her protectors was unconscious and mumbling prophetic nonsense while the other was clueless. Marion had said he preferred this life to their old lives. Harley didn't agree. Harley liked the world to make sense, and maybe if he could make this world make sense, maybe then he would agree with Marion. But not until then.

Maia wiped her eyes and looked up at Harley, "Mr. Harley. Mr. Walker. What do we do?"

Harley shook his head and gently put a hand upon Maia's shoulder, "When you fall down, get up." He said, "When you can't stand, rise to kneeling."

Maia wiped her eyes and looked up at Harley.

He stood and gently pulled her back to her feet, "When you can't rise, face skyward. And never admit you've been beaten."

"But we did stand." Maia said to him.

"Precisely." Harley answered, "We always think we're beaten long before we really are. When our minds and our hearts tell us that we're finished we need to train ourselves not to listen and to carry on."

"Mr. Harley, you talk about being reasonable and I don't understand. That doesn't sound reasonable."

Harley smiled, "The great secret of the reasonable man is to continue doing small things, rather than giving up when large things stop working. We continue to try reasonable things long after the process has stopped being reasonable to us. That is how the ocean wears away the shore."

"You sound like a storyteller Mr. Harley."

"Well, being reasonable, means you do what you have to do. And you don't complain about it. Let's get in the Cricket and figure out where to go."

They piled into the Cricket and Harley started the engine and then let the van idle as he flipped through a road map looking at the surrounding area.

I don't know this area well. We're right on the border of two counties: Linwich County and Howard Country, there are maybe four towns total in the two counties with more than five houses and a pig." Harley paused, "But who knows if witches live in small towns or big cities or off in the woods. We need something useful, a clue or a hint or we're just going to spin our wheels until we're caught."

From the back of the van, Marion spoke in a voice that wasn't his, wasn't even a man's voice, but the voice an old woman.

"The wheel keeps turning." He said.

"That sounds like Mrs. Trilby, Marion's crazy old neighbour with the cats." Harley's voice faded away into a stunned silence, "It was Mercer that saved us from the Hound the first time. Mercer is Mrs. Trilby's cat. Mrs. Trilby is a Witch. Mrs. Trilby is a witch. We had help right where we began and we didn't know how to look for it! Mrs. Trilby, can you hear me? Marion can you hear me? You helped us with that move against the hound before. Can you hear me this time? What do we need to do? What do we need to know?"

"Your life is not only yours dear. We merely tell a story to each other, we just play the parts as needed. Some of us play heroes. Some of us play mentors. Some of choose to play villains, often mistaking these roles for the role of hero. We retell our stories to each new generation. The story changes, but the the story remembers the previous tellings. And the new story rhymes with its ancestor self."

"I mean about the story. What do we do in the story?"

"All cultures tell stories dear. All peoples belonged to the lands that birthed them. That one people have been trapped in one mad little story means nothing on the scale of humanity. History is merely his story: the Story of the Locust King, and when it ends the cycle will continue and the wheel will remain whole. I hope you realize that his story was not humanities story. the story of humanity is a wheel, and his story was just a stone that caused a slight bump."

"How do we reach you? If you're a witch and we need a witch, how do we reach you?"

"You need local help dear. Not me. The nearest coven is in Linwich County, led by Agnes Bladder. They're nasty things though, so be careful. They'll try to use you to their own ends, so be ready dear. You're big. The big pieces on the chess board and until you learn how to play the game, people are going to move you around to suit their needs."

"Should we even deal with them if they're that bad? They sound like villains." Harley said.

"Dear, one of the big mistakes the Locust King made was to try and divide things into good and evil, pure and impure, holy and unholy. Everything is sacred dear, especially the profane. And all powerful things are dangerous, and so you have to deal with dangerous beings. The Locust King wants us staying away from powerful beings, because then we might have power that didn't come from him, we might be able to act without his story. So seek out dangerous things and make you own deals with them. The devil's bargain is propaganda, dear. "

"How do I find them?"

"Linwich Crossing is the only town of note in Linwich County dear, get yourself there and they'll find you. You four are spraying, well I guess I'd call it narrative radiation. Either way, anyone who is paying attention to the story can't help but feel it. Four main characters travelling together and carrying the plot, the old story to boot. Oh yes, those old vipers will find you so fast it will make your head spin. Just don't let them fleece you too bad."

"Thanks Mrs. Trilby, Now, how's Marion doing? Marion are you alright?"

Marion spoke with his own voice this time, "I'm in that other land I told you about. The Shadowlands, I think it's called. It's hard to interact with you like this and I know I'm drawing attention by doing it, so I need to stay brief. But I'm okay. I learned how to do this from the bad guys, but I'm on the run here too. So I need to keep this brief. Say, what does my body look like there? Am I there at all, because I'm still not sure what happens when I enter the Shadowlands. Did I just disappear or am I like all sleeping beauty?"

"There is no reality where I am going to call you sleeping beauty," Harley said, "It's more like coma patient with occasional lapses into schizophrenic prophet."

"Dear," Mrs. Trilby said, speaking through Marion again, "You really need to get going, or you're both going to get caught. Harley dear, find the coven- get them to train you. Marion has enough skills he's figured out that he can manage, but you seem to be running without any of the powers associated with your role- you need them dear. You've got all sorts of unfair prophecies to fulfill."

Harley shook his head, "I hear you Mrs. Trilby. Okay Maia, let's write a story where we get to win."

Verse Three: The Kings of Old

Harley drove the Cricket to Linwich Crossing crossing over two antique wood bridges spanning two crossed rivers. The town was very old and was all faded cracked paint and exposed blackened wood that looked as though Linwich Crossing were somehow the origin of all dry rot. The bridges nearly rattled Harley's teeth loose and Maia giggled on the first bridge and sang vowels across the second bridge listening as the rattling played games with her voice.

"Feeling Better?" Harley asked.

"Kind of and not at all and all at the same time," Maia answered,

"I'm feeling a sorts of stuff and other stuff too. Is that okay?"

"That sounds pretty much exactly like I'd expect."

"Mr. Harley, what are those towers over there?" Maia asked, and Harley turned his head to look out past the edge of town to the metal towers in the distance that looked like a hipster had tried to knock off the Eiffel Tower. Harley stared for a moment, and then returned to watching the road.

"It's a shale oil drilling operation. Hydraulic Fracturing, fracking and that sort of thing. It's probably the only reason this town still exists. I bet this was farm country, probably pasture and cattle as far as the eye could see before the drought went from an event to state of being. I don't think this place has seen rain for decades. Have you seen any white vans yet? Any men in sun glasses and suits? Any horrifying black dogs?"

"No sir, Mr. Harley."

"That's good. What do you think our chances of being lucky are this time."

From the back seat Marion mumbled, "... the story never stops... "

"I don't need input from you, Mr. Jinx." Harley said with a smile. The town had not entirely given up hope or life and there was a small General store and gas station and launder mat that seemed to serve as a catch all commercial location for the whole town.

Harley was beginning to think that village would be a more appropriate term, maybe even Hamlet. He bought camping gear, tents and sleeping bags and filled up the gas tank and his jerry can. He bought a bunch of long lasting food and noted with some worry that they were running much lower on funds now that he gone on this much needed spending spree. He tucked away the remaining money for gas and emergencies and made a mental note to tell Marion once his friend woke up. Harley kept alert as he did his shopping, but no agents showed up and now white vans drove past.

"Mr. Harley, can I have a hamburger?" Maia asked as they finished loading the new gear into the Cricket. She pointed across the street to a small burger stand that looked like something from a different time named Big Mack's.

"They are asking to be sued aren't they?" Harley said to himself, " Maybe they'll claim parody or fair use. They'll probably lose anyway though."

Harley opened his wallet and did some mental calculations, then finally decided that Maia could use the boost that a treat could give and nodded to her. Harley parked the Cricket directly in front of the picture window of Big Mack's so that Marion and Fitzroy would be visible at all times and stepped into the

building. A bell above the door jangled as they enter the restaurant. Behind the front counter stood a mammoth sized woman in a frilly apron bearing the embroidered name tag of Mackenzie. She had a few streaks of grey running through her hair and crow's feet around her eyes, but Harley guessed her age to be somewhere around the mid-thirties suffering from a case of hard living. She was built like the cybernetic synthesis of a lumberjack and a pro wrestler and Harley was reasonably sure that she could bench press both him and Marion at the same time. She nodded as they entered and waved a hand to the empty tables that lined the building.

"Sit yourselves wherever you want folks. I'll be right with you. My cook's sick, and by sick I'm pretty sure he meant hung over. It's not a problem for making the food. I taught the lazy featherweight to cook, but it means I'm doing everyone's job today, because my server just hasn't shown up at all- probably 'sick' too. Pretty much the whole town was at the opening party for the fracking site last night. Free booze and tiny sandwiches is a powerful draw in a small town like this."

Harley grinned, "I'm guessing you're Big Mack?"

"Yep," She grinned, "Retired Minor League Pro Wrestler. Big Mack: hundreds and hundreds served!"

"Why'd you quit? Get tired of of it?"

Big Mack shook her head, "Never. I love the kayfabe and the performance, the story, you know? But you know if you give your life to a fantasy, eventually it actually asks you to hand it over. And then you have to choose, live in the story or live in the real world. And you know, I couldn't make a living in the fantasy land, as much as I'd like to do so. So here I am. I'll get you menus, but I recommend my special: the Spinning Suplex Burger with curly fries. Can I get you coffee to start?"

Harley nodded, "Coffee sounds great." and they sat at a booth looking out at the Cricket while Big Mack dropped a pair of menus and bustled back behind the counter to pour coffee.

"Princess? You want coffee too?" She called from the counter.

Maia scrunched her face up, "I don't like coffee and it doesn't taste good."

Big Mack grinned, "I'll make you a latte macchiato. You'll like that. Are you lactose intolerant?"

Maia shook her head and Big Mack busied herself with the coffee and espresso machines. Harley and Maia opened their menus and began to look through at the available options. As they did, harley suddenly heard an elderly female voice from the front door.

"And there they are fresh from the Bonelands and still smelling of compliance and old sweat socks. How are you little critters doing?"

Harley looked up to see a group of somewhere around a dozen old women standing behind him like the world's most progressive biker gang. Harley noted as he looked at the women, that he hadn't heard the bell on the door ring when they had, presumably, opened it to enter. Harley looked at Big Mack and noted that she looked suddenly very tense.

"I'm guessing one of you is Agnes Bladder," Harley said, to which the lead woman nodded, " Right then, let's start right away. What are the Bonelands? I know I've heard that before. But nobody seems to want to explain how this game is played."

The woman called Agnes Bladder smiled, raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms.

"That's because you four are the movers and shakers," She waved to indicate both Harley and Maia, but also Marion and Fitzroy in the Cricket, "Main characters with all the power and chances for horrible horrible tragedy that goes along with that. And the more you know the better you can play this game. The better you playing, the more you will disrupt the status quo, the more destruction you can wreck. So people are afraid of you. Even your friends."

"That is not a comforting answer. But again, what are the Bonelands?" Harley said.

"The Shadowlands are where the story is told, where the game is played. They are the world of symbol and myth. The Bonelands are the other place. The world of flesh and bone. The world devoid of story."

"Then Marion, and probably Fitzroy are trapped in the Shadowlands. How do we free them?" Harley said.

"You're never truly free of the Shadowlands."

"How do I get him lucid in this world then?"

"That depends on what he's doing there. He may not be ready to leave." Agnes Bladder answered.

"Well he's a pain to haul around like this." Harley said, gazing out the window at the Cricket.

"Just be glad only two of you young critters are deep sea diving

at the same time." Agnes Bladder put her hands on hips as she said this.

Harley shook his head, "Don't go there. I don't want to hear that."

"Did you ladies want to find yourself some seats?" Big Mack said carefully as she brought harley's coffee and Maia's latte macchiato.

Agnes nodded and sat down beside Maia, who quickly scooted up against the window in alarm. Agnes waved vaguely at her pack of old ladies and they seated themselves at tables around the restaurant. Harley noted that the restaurant suddenly seemed very busy just based on the new number of occupied seats.

Harley stared at her, "So you're the witches that we are apparently supposed to find. I was told you'd find us, and I guess I should be grateful that you found us so quickly, but I can't help being suspicious."

"Then you aren't an idiot," Agnes Bladder said, "Which is good. It's always a pain when main characters are idiots."

"Okay, but what does that mean? Main Characters? Apparently Marion can summon tomahawks and astral project himself into the Shadowlands and use it as a the world's weirdest cell phone. Can you guys do that stuff too?"

Agnes Bladder shook her head, "Some of that yes, but you two are the children of the great ancients from outside time, the cosmic couple; Lady of Fire and her consort The Man of Void. You walk in their footsteps and draw upon their power and we cannot. That is why we seek your assistance. All the players have beings from which they draw power. The Locust King draws power from the Grey through bargains

with the serpent Falsenight and the Locust Spirit itself. Witches draw from the Primal One. She is strong and ancient, but the Lady of Fire and her man are beyond time and not subject to the limitations upon beings bound by time."

Harley shook his head, "This is getting to feel like we're taking an alternate historic Mythology class and slept through the introductory chapters."

Agnes Bladder smiled again, "Well, you're going to need to play catch up if you want to survive. There are two sides to this battle and two stories warring for dominance. I suspect you know this much. The Locust King stands on one side. On the other side stand the Last Princess and the Kudavbin King mentored by the Storytellers- at least in this chapter of the story. There are other chapters you know. And of course, the Locust King has his servants and his forces."

"We've had to deal with the hound and the men of black and white so far. Anything else we should be aware of in terms of nasties."

"They aren't servants of the Locust King, but Wendigo are an ongoing problem for all sides of the conflict, and they are always a problem in the wasteland. They have an affinity for the wasteland."

"What's the wasteland?"

"The Wasteland is one of the locations in the story, an archetypal location, in the same way the Storytellers are archetypal characters that you and your boyfriend are filling."

"he's not my boyfriend."

"Does he know that? In any case, the wasteland is the land that the Locust King's empire has used up and abandoned. This late in the story, the wasteland starts to become a common feature. Eventually the wasteland becomes almost the whole map. And the Wendigo are creatures of the wasteland."

"Why?"

"The Wendigo are the spawn of That Which Survives. I've heard it referred to as the Spirit of the Winter Wind, the Ghost of the Starving Wolf, and a dozen other charming names. But it all comes back to hunger and to survival. That Which Survives is the spirit of endurance, survival at all costs. It is the core of life

really, the persistent desire to strive against the inevitability of heat death of the universe. It is the spark which convinces us to battle against entropy and the grave. Without it, we cease to live and new generations cease to come into existence. But That Which Survives is not a sane thing, it is the embodiment of an impulse, and if that impulse is not controlled it becomes a disease of the mind and the soul. The Wendigo have gone mad from hunger and have been possessed by the hunger which cannot be sated, they have become the hungry ghosts."

"Okay, I heard what you said, but the term Wendigo is Native American, and the term hungry ghost is from Asia, Japan I think."

"All cultures must craft stories to deal with the hunger, cannibalism, desperation, starvation and other problems that a tribe might encounter when times are bad. They must invoke gods and demons and monsters and spells and incantations to protect them from being destroyed by these things. The stories are the magick that holds the tribe together through such trying times."

"But what I want to know is whether the Algonquin people invented the Wendigo, told them into existence through the story, or whether they discovered or named them through their stories."

"Yes, exactly, but not these Wendigo. These are the product of syncretic myth-building by previous tellers of this story."

"You must have misheard me. It wasn't a yes or no question. It was an 'A' or 'B' question."

"You must not have understood what you asking."

"Okay, Okay. This is all obviously useful. but do I need to hear all of it now?" Harley asked, "This is starting get overwhelming."

"Not yet, maybe never." Agnes Bladder answered.

Big Mack slipped cautiously back to the table, "Was anyone ready to order?"

"Get my usual Mackenzie honey." Agnes said without breaking eye contact with Harley.

"I'll have your special. I sounded good when you told us about it." Harley said.

"Can I have the Little Wrestler Special?" Maia asked.

"Of course you can!" Big Mack said with a smile. "I'll get those started and then check with the rest of your friends."

"Just get them coffee in the mean time then." Agnes said and waved a hand vaguely to dismiss Big Mack.

Harley watched as Big Mack snuck away to kitchen. He noticed that she watched Agnes as she left, glancing back several times on her way to the kitchen.

"So where do you witches stand in all of this?" Harley asked.

"Witches and Wizards are meddlers and mentors, shapers and subverters. We tweak the story. We are supporting characters."

"Are wizards just men witches?" Maia asked.

"No, little critter. Witches and Wizards are occupations, no gender is required. Men can be witches and women can be wizards. The difference is in the roles they play. Wizards are tricksters and mentors, they actively disrupt and commit acts of mythic sabotage. Very active, running about and doing things. Witches are advisors and midwives, supporters and subverters, corruptors and healers. We serve the Primal One, they serve The Sleeping Beast."

"Wait a minute, The Sleeping Beast?" Harley asked, "I've heard of the Sleeping Beast. It's a book, it's a movie monster. Some guy from New England wrote a bunch of horror stories about the Sleeping Beast back in the thirties before he died of tuberculosis or something. Seward Harris Lovelace, that was the name. The Sleeping Beast isn't a god or a demon. It isn't anything. It isn't even real!"

"It's fictional, that doesn't mean it isn't real. Especially in the Shadowlands."

"What does that mean?" Maia asked.

"We're being drawn into story worlds, so I'm assuming that things in the story worlds can affect us."

Harley said, "So given that the Sleeping Beast is kind of like Godzilla meets Cthulhu on the set of Lord of the Rings, I kind of don't want to meet it- do you?"

"I guess not, but is that right?" Maia asked, turning to Agnes Bladder.

"Almost entirely wrong, but it will do until I have time to explain it better. For now, anything that convinces you to run should you see it is satisfactory. The Old Ones are ideas incarnate, they ARE what they mean and represent. They are metaphor as god and devil. Really, they are the essence of story, ideas as things. A handy memory device and teaching tool with pitchfork and horns."

"Also," Harley said, "I thought it was called the Sleeping Beast, not the Sleeping Priest?"

"Stories changes. Most gods and demons have dozens or thousands of names and roles the shift like sand dunes."

"So, I guess my next question is why you're so eager to help us. What do you get out of telling us how to navigate this supernatural mine field."

Agnes Bladder shook her head, "I'm a naturalist. I don't believe in anything supernatural and neither should any Shaman or Magician worth their salt. Magick has nothing to do with the supernatural and everything to do with the story. You will never see any supernatural occurrence, if you think you do, you're going mad."

"Then I'm definitely going mad."

"Don't mistake the workings of the story for an occurrence of the Supernatural."

"Are you saying that what we've seen is natural?"

"Not at all, we are in the story. None of this is supernatural or natural, it is narrative devices and nothing more."

"You're making my head hurt. I've seen Marion summon magic Tomahawks and I've fought a dog made of black holes. I don't know how you can hear that and not call it supernatural."

"Because you are misunderstanding what you are."

"Then tell me. I'm listening."

"There is no point. You aren't fluent in the language of the story yet. I could tell you, and you would not understand. You have to arrive there on your own or else your power will be destroyed and you will fall."

"That's convenient."

"Story logic tends to be."

Big Mack slipped up balancing three plates and quickly deposited them in front of Harley, Maia and Agnes.

"One Spinning Suplex Burger with Curly fries. One Little Wrestler Special. One Rakfisk Open Face Sandwich with sauerkraut and black sausage on the side. How's your machiatto honey?"

Maia looked up from her meal and its little cardboard championship belt, "It was really good. Thank you."

"I didn't hear an answer to my question." Harley said, "Why are you helping us? I want my best friend back. I want a handle on this game that I am playing. I've been told that a witch can help be get that, but everything I hear from you convinces my you have your own game you're playing. So why are you helping me?"

"I said you weren't an idiot, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did."

"Good. You four are far more powerful than my whole coven combined. Right now, you're running scared and with no direction. And that's because you don't know how to use your power and you don't know how to guide yourself. We can teach you much of what you need to know to do those things. In exchange, we want you to use your newly acquired abilities to help us. We'll unlock your power, and then you pay us back by using it on our behalf."

"I can hear the theme song to the Godfather playing in the background," Harley said, "What do you want us to do?"

"Nothing bad for you. I told you that we witches play a subversive role. And I told you that the Locust King derives his power from the Grey via the Locust Spirit and from the serpent spirit Falsenight He accesses Falsenight's power through an artifact, a reliquary if you like: Falsenight's Cup."

"You're sending us on a hunt for a MacGuffin?"

"Oh no, not a MacGuffin. MacGuffin's don't do anything. This is a plot device, it's actually useful."

"What's a MacGuffin. Mr. Harley?" Maia asked.

"A MacGuffin is the thing in the story that everyone wants. The plot centres around people trying to get it, but it never seems to do anything and doesn't serve a purpose except to motivate the plot. Basically it's something people want, because the plot says that they want it."

"And that is why this isn't a MacGuffin because the cup actually does something," Agnes said, "The cup allows the user to access the power of Falsenight, and that power is enormous. Falsenight has some tie to the Great Serpent, a traitorous child perhaps- the legends are unclear. But in either case, Falsenight is one of the great trump cards that empowers the Locust King's forces and his empire. cut off access to that power and you cripple the Locust King."

"How's the first few bites of food?" Big Mack asked as she darted past with food for the other member's of Agnes' coven.

"It's really good Mrs. Mack" Maia said as she swallowed a bite of hamburger.

Harley realized that he hadn't started eating.

"Let's find out," He said and quickly dug into his burger, "This is really good. Thank you for recommending it. There's some spice in this."

"My own secret spice mix." Big Mack said with a smile that Harley noticed, still seemed quite nervous. She retreated to the front desk and watched everyone.

"So, what I'm hearing is that what you want is big and dangerous and you're going to put us at risk rather than yourselves." Harley said.

"Not at all," Agnes said, a little too quickly for Harley's liking, "You don't understand the difference between your power and our power levels. This is destroy us, but would be easy as cake for you."

"And what happens if we don't make it? What happens to the story if we fail and end up dead in a ditch somewhere?" Harley asked.

"That won't happen," Agnes said.

"But what is it does?" Harley insisted.

Agnes shrugged "The story has an answer, and the story will go on."

"Without us." Harley said, finishing the last bite of his burger.

"Are you refusing our assistance?" Agnes asked.

"No, you have us in a difficult position. We need to know how to play this game, so I guess we have to deal with you. But I don't like what I've heard. You say we're more powerful than you. So I want you to remember that. Because if you betray us, or sell us out; I will hold a grudge. I always try to be reasonable first. Don't ask what I do second."

Agnes smiled, "Now you're in the proper mindset to make deals in the Shadowlands." She extended a skeletal hand wrapped in parchment like skin and Harley reached across the table to shake it.

Verse Four: And Her Son

"You don't pray to call help down from the sky." Agnes Bladder began as she stood peering out at the mining site outside town. "It doesn't work that way. Prayer isn't a call for help, its a promise to future."

"That's not what I was taught in Sunday school," Maia said.

"I tend to agree with Maia on this," Harley said, "Praying is like giving Santa Claus your wish list, at least the way I always heard it."

Agnes reached out and sharply flicked Harley's ear, "You selfish child! True prayer isn't asking for a present. True prayer is planting a seed and promising tomorrow that you will water that seed until it grows to an oak."

Harley rubbed his ear, "Okay, and your point?"

"You are our seed to be planted. The help we're giving you is our promise to the future. So listen carefully, because this is important."

Harley stood just to Agnes' left with Maia in front of him. Harley kept a hand on each of Maia's shoulders as Agnes spoke, looking at the witch rather than the mining site that Agnes had indicated was where Harley would fulfil his end of their agreement. Agnes Bladder was a crone in the classic sense: large nose and sharp eyes, a face that bore a interstate roadmap worth of wrinkles and lines, hands warped and gnarled like the branches of an ancient tree, all capped off by a stooped back that made her posture look like a question mark.

"The first thing that you need to understand to work in the story world is what is what and what that means. People have been digging around in the Shadowlands for as long as we've been people. Not just Homo Sapiens, our older cousins and parents and grandparents- Homo Neanderthalensis and Homo Erectus to name just two. Bone flute and burial mounds and ochre body paint are found on ancient sites all over the world. We've been talking to gods and using magic for as long as we've be able."

Harley shook his head, "I don't want to sound like a flat earth atheist here, because I'm not in denial about the kind of world we're suddenly living in. But I feel like I'm playing catch up, because I would have called myself agnostic before this happened and I definitely wouldn't have believed in ghost or old gods or magic prior to getting swept up into the story, whatever the story is."

Agnes nodded, "Very sensible. Keep those ideas in mind. You see, gods are a way of personifying concepts. They are a way of giving form to ideas, building myth from symbol. Magic is a system of explanation for things that we can predict, things that we can use, things that we can reliably observe, but which we cannot explain. Magic is how we explain things for which we do not understand the underlying mechanism. Theologians and critics call this the god of the gaps theory, and generally as a pejorative, an insult. Which is nonsense. Humans have been using since fire long before they understood combustion. If humans were not willing to play with that magic flame well it was still magic, cities wouldn't exist today. You need to stop imagining that what you've seen somehow re-writes physics or invalidates natural

history or renders science irrelevant. None of this conflicts with natural science, because that is the Bonelands and this is the Shadowlands and the two meet only in the telling of the story."

"You lost me," Harley admitted, "I was hearing what you were saying and then, poof."

"You're too rational, too reasonable, to level headed to make the jump necessary on intuition. I imagine that's what your boyfriend did."

"We aren't dating," Harley said.

"That's a shame," one of the other witches said, "You'd make a cute couple."

Harley turned and looked at her as she spoke, trying to remember her name. He was fairly certain she was called Phyllis Heart. There were a lot of them and Harley was struggling to keep them straight in his head. Phyllis Heart looked like all of the Golden Girls rolled impossibly into one. She perfectly mimicked the prototypical sitcom grandmother with a gentle face and a clever smile and hair wrapped into ridiculous curlers.

"People trust little old ladies," Phyllis heart continued "Even people playing the game. Which is foolish. I started playing this game when I was a young girl. Does the game seem easy to you young one? Has the learning curve been gentle on your bones so far?"

"No ma'am."

"And yet here I am, still playing the game, still moving other people across the game board. For decades now, I've held my title as witch. That sound easy?"

"No ma'am."

"And yet people underestimate me every day. But you won't, will you young one? Not any more."

"No ma'am."

"And that's because I like you. You're practical. So we're giving you a look behind the curtain as gift. Hmph. That sounds vulgar, like I'm a dance hall girl. I don't imagine a young thing like you would want that kind of look from an old lady like me."

Harley had no answer.

"And now I've made you blush. I do like you. Decent child at heart. I don't know that the game will be kind to that decent soul though. I do wish you luck."

"Luck hasn't been readily abundant thus far, ma'am."

"Don't be ridiculous. You've been all kinds of lucky, or you wouldn't be alive. Do you know how many people might be the Storytellers and never make past the first vision?"

"I haven't had my first vision." Harley said.

Mildred Spine piped up, "Or maybe you just didn't recognize it when it first happened."

Harley turned in the opposite direction to look at the new speaker. He had noticed that a lot of the witches seemed to work in pairs. Mildred Spine always seemed to stand near Margaret Rib. Mildred Spine stood straight and wore jeans and a knit wool sweater. She looked practical and indomitable and stood over six feet tall and very thin, but looked in no way frail. She made football players look up when she passed. Margaret Rib by contrast, though also tall and very thin, looked as though a strong wind would blow her over if it caught even her wispy long hair. She looked like a dying willow, or a starving ostrich, with huge eyes and a sagging skin on her face that hinted at her having been heavier in her youth.

Mildred Spine stared at Harley with owl's hard glare, "You're an oak tree kid, you know that? Your stronger than everything else around you, but you break when you ought to bend."

Margaret Rib nodded, an act which caused her whole frame to sway unsteadily, "There is strength in embracing weakness dear. There will always be things stronger than you. There are times when you have to roll with the blows and let yourself fall. You remember that dear."

Agnes Bladder added, "He's having trouble seeing this because he's too practical. That's the whole of it."

"Or maybe he hasn't learned how to apply his practicality to the new game is all," added the witch called Lady Purge. Lady Purge was a tiny little lady who had been scrunched down like a coiled spring by time and gravity. She smelled of spoiled perfume and vinegar, and dressed in traditional witches black with a knitted black shawl stained with tea and spotted with Biscuit crumbs,

"Look how long it took the Gees to get a handle on how to make the magic work for them."

Genevieve Sole and Gertrude Hand, referred to by the other ladies as The Gees we childhood friends who wore their silver hair in matching high rise beehive hairdos and dressed as though they had never left the Sock hop. They wore too much make up and smiled like the Stepford Wives. Genevieve Sole nodded in response to Lady Purge, "Far too concerned with what people might think, should they learn the truth. Far too concerned with doing the right thing. Held us back far longer than it should."

Gertrude added, "Other people get their stories in your head, and they make you into characters in their stories and they make you dance on their stage. Where's your stage?"

Harley was starting to get overwhelmed by the flurry of voices around him.

"Is Linwich Crossing your stage then?" He asked, and instantly regretted the tone he had used. The words sounded accusatory or mocking, definitely defensive, as they floated in the air.

"Don't let appearance fool you Storyteller," Agnes Bladder said, "I know you're new to the role and to the story, but don't let us being little old ladies fool you. We serve ancient powers, we draw our strength from the Primal One. You'd be fools to think you can brush us aside, especially given how underdeveloped your abilities are."

"I'm sorry," Harley said, "I'm just tense. Too much running from the bad guys, too much frustration, not enough options. To keep with the story metaphor; it sounds like the villains are everywhere, and the good guys are in hiding and broken. The more I hear, the more hopeless it sounds."

Agnes shook her head, "This is not a battle between good and evil. This is not a duality or a dichotomy. The game board is vast and, if I may steal from dear old Whitman, contains multitudes."

Harley couldn't decide how to respond and Agnes continued, "There are many horrible things in the story. Ancient gods and demons and devils lurk in the shadows and the dark of the tales you will rediscover and weave back to life. And these evils are essential to the survival of the story. It is a poor story that assumes evil must be opposed. Evil is an idea, a creation of the Locust King and his folk, a way of describing those who do not step into line with him. We are wicked and our patroness is more wicked, and dark and vile and inhuman in her thinking also. But that does not mean she must be destroyed or that you could

destroy her. The hallmark of the Locust King has been his penchant for the fool's errand. He seeks constantly to be the hero and casts all who disagree with him as the villain."

"That's something I keep wondering. Something I keep hearing from other people. Nobody seems certain who is in fact the hero. People have called us main characters, but nobody seems certain as to who the story belongs to, who it's about."

"Everyone has their quest and their story. You are the storyteller. But the battle here is precisely that, whose story does the storyteller tell?"

"He's not even telling the story yet," Countess Cleanse pointed out, leaning in to tap Harley on the breast bone.

"He's Bishop on the board, but he's acting like a knight." Her sister, Sybil Cistern added reaching up to put a hand on Harley's shoulder.

The sisters known as Countess Cleanse and Sybil Cistern were not in fact twins, although one might be forgiven for believing otherwise. They both looked nearly identical, round little heads with iron grey hair in round little buns, all set upon round little bodies wrapped in pink knit sweaters that matched perfectly.

"So teach me," Harley said, "You're sending me into some place too dangerous or too difficult for you ladies to manage it, and I haven't heard anything that will help me use this power I'm supposed to have. I haven't heard any tutorials on how to summon tomahawks or have convenient clairvoyant visions, or anything."

There was a brief silence and then the women broke into frenzied argumentative speech, voicing clamouring over each other as they fought for auditory dominance.

"We should help him summon Boneshaker."

"We should teach him the seven league walk."

"We should teach him the path of winds."

Agnes raised her hand and the coven fell silent. "I heard the seven league walk. He's the Walker so that will probably come naturally, and he'll need that to get in and out in a hurry."

"What's Boneshaker?" Harley asked, "I heard that get mentioned."

"The flanged mace that is the weapon of the Walker is named Boneshaker."

"So, if I'm hearing correctly, that's the equivalent of Marion summoning his tomahawks?"

"Yes. And?"

"Then I want to learn that too. How long will that take?"

Agnes frowned, "Summoning Boneshaker will be like re-attaching a phantom limb. That mace is a part of your character, as much a part of you as your arm or your sense of honour. You have to imagine yourself as a character. What would King Arthur be without Excalibur? What would Thor be without Mjolnir? The costume is part of the character, like putting on a mask to become a god. The mace part of your character as you exist now within the story. You need to reach out deep in the Infinity codex, deep in the heart of the story. You need to find it. And you need to pull loose that missing part of you."

"How do I do that? It's a great pep talk, but how do I do that?"

The coven burst into murmuring again.

"He's far too pragmatic."

"No imagination, how is he the storyteller?"

"He's only half the storyteller. Maybe we can work with the other one."

"He's all we've got until the Dreamer breaks free."

"He'll never get it."

"He's hopeless."

Harley waved his hands like an umpire calling a play at home base,

"I can hear you, you know! What am I missing? And why would you think that explanation would be enough?"

Lady Purge answered, "As a storyteller, you need to be capable of creation, drawing something from nothing. That is what story telling is. If you can't do that, how can you tell a story?"

Harley shook his head, "I haven't heard anyone call me a creator, I heard them call me story-teller. Teller. Storytelling is like playing music, learning the tune and the rhythm, making old stories sing with a fresh voice. It's not necessarily about making new music, but about making old music sound new. And from everything I've heard, this is an old story. why are you trying to make me play free jazz? I hate free jazz."

Mildred Spine nodded, "You need to hear the music before you can improvise on it?"

Harley nodded, "That's basically it."

Margaret Rib, "Oh, we can help with that dear. Take my hand," She reached out and grasped Harley's hand with surprising strength, numerous rings digging into his hands, "Feel the magic, or music is you prefer. I'm going to summon something through you, pay attention to how it feels."

Harley felt a tingle running up his arm and initially mistook it for a pinched nerve from Margaret Rib's iron grip. but the tingling flowed down into Harley's right hand and he felt something trying to grow solid in his hand, finally his hand closed around a ceremonial bone dagger that Harley heavily suspected had been carved from a rib.

"Perfect. Did you feel that?" Mildred Spine asked, clapping her hands lightly.

"I actually did."

"Good, can I please have my blade dear?" Margaret Rib asked extending her hand.

Harley handed her the dagger and Agnes cleared her throat.

"Now you try." Agnes said, "Call up the mace Boneshaker in the same way. Feel for the same feeling."

"I'll try, but I suspect I'm going to take a little while to get this."

Harley wasn't wrong. After half an hour of cackling, coaching and coaxing; Harley still had not summoned the mace. Maia had remained resolutely upbeat through the whole process, cheering on Harley and maintaining absolute faith that he would master the Magic. Harley wasn't sure if he was grateful for her faith or embarrassed by it.

"I don't even know what I'm summoning," He said finally, "I don't really know the story that I'm a part of, and I certainly don't know how I would recognize this Boneshaker either."

"We can show you that, you know," Countess Cleanse said and quickly reached up and tapped Harley's forehead sharply. Harley felt the ground drop out from under him and vision began to darken until he was falling through a void. Above Harley a figure faded into focus. He recognized the figure as himself, although it didn't look like him. The figure was androgynous and dressed in numerous overlapping capes of black with red trim and held an enormous two handed mace, whose head was made of seven plates or flanges designed to crush bone and collapse armour. The figure pulled back a dark hood to look at Harley.

"Why do you hesitate? The walker acts. It is the realm of the Dreamer to dream."

And then Harley landed in the grass of the hill overlooking the mine, the impact driving the air from his lungs. He lay there stunned until he noticed that the coven of women were clapping, and Maia was outright cheering. Then he noticed he was holding something in right hand.

Harley shook his head, "No way that worked." He said, looking at his hands. But sure enough, there in his grasp was a now familiar two handed flanged mace.

"Well I'll be damned." he muttered.

"And now. On to seven league walking," Agnes announced.

"All this help is going to kill me." Harley muttered.

Seven league walking turned out to be both easier and much more difficult. Agnes Bladder described the process as walking with intention rather than walking with legs. Travelling by willing oneself across the landscape. In theory, the coven explained at length, seven league walking could be used to travel through solid objects, across oceans and even to different worlds. Harley got the hang of the process fairly quickly. He focused on his destination and mentally removed the distance between himself and the

destination. The problem was that Harley was only able to do this with places that he could see. The witches put this down his insufferable pragmatism and rationality. He could bound from hilltop to hilltop almost immediately, but could not disappear around the corner of a building. He could travel through a window, but not a door.

"Keep moving, Keep Walking. Little steps." The Gees said to him in unison as he practiced. All of the women had their rituals and their mantras, although Harley noticed that these rituals were not at all the same. The rule of magic seemed to be: whatever worked for that person. This drove Harley mad, as it felt entirely wrong to him. If magic worked, then there should be a reason that it worked. Still after two days of practise, although he still couldn't move through opaque objects or to places he couldn't see, Agnes pronounced his mastery of summoning and seven league travel sufficient to attempt the mission that was his part of the bargain. Of course, they still hadn't told him what that mission involved.

Verse Five: The Golden Prince

Special Agent Saul Bridger sat at a table of a chic too white coffee shop looking out the window sipping an espresso. He decided that the truth was not within his reach, perhaps it was out there, somewhere. But it wasn't within his reach. A Kidnapping case taxed everyone on it. The longer the victim remained at large, the lower the chances of find that victim alive. Bridger cursed himself silently for not taking the two suspects into custody immediately. Night and Day, he shook his head at the names, had made a run for it and then everything had gone nuts. Another agency had set up a sting operation and Bridger could not find out which agency or under whose authority. Bridger couldn't get access to the suspect's home or the victim's home either now. His persistence had resulted in him being placed on administrative leave, with pay, and told to take a vacation and forget about the case.

Bridger had tried, he'd really tried. But then he read in the paper that one Amy Welcher had been reported missing by her mother. The news report hadn't mentioned that Amy Welcher was the long time girl friend of one Harley Night, one of two primary suspects in the Salt kidnapping case. Later news reports indicated that Night and Day were now wanted in connection with the murder of federal officers, apparently the officers had been killed with an axe. And yet, when Bridger called his friends in various federal agencies, nobody seemed to be able to find out who investigating the kidnapping and nobody had a record of federal agents murdered with an axe. Bridger had tried calling the news channel and was met

with lawyers and doublespeak, far more resistance than Bridger had expected for a story where the news report seemed to have come straight from an official agency statement.

The whole affair left Bridger confused, with a bad taste in his mouth. He could taste a cover up, and it tasted like aspartame and MSG. Bridger knew that he should ignore this. The whole sequence might as well have been written on a film noir script. He was setting himself up to be the rebel agent on the run from his own organization. He could see the liner notes alluding to government cover ups and conspiracies. Bridger wiped his mouth instinctively.

"It's like a sausage. If you want to keep enjoying something, don't find out what goes into it." He said to himself, "I guess I'm about to stop enjoying my job. But really, what else am I going to do? Two kids have been kidnapped and taken who knows where. They're probably already dead, but I have to keep looking until I find a kid or a corpse."

He paused, and then finished his espresso.

"Mother Mary, I hope they're still alive."

* * *

"I'm dead," Fitzroy said to nobody in particular as he looked around at timber walls rising around him in all directions. Fitzroy noted that he seemed to be in some sort of walled village, within the walls were earth sheltered buildings with small garden plots in front of them. The people moving around were dressed in a manner that seemed to draw upon elements of iron age Pre-Roman European peoples, East Asian herding peoples and Native American peoples. What had led Fitzroy to pre-declare himself deceased were the people at the gates leading in and out of the village. The gatekeepers were dressed in tabards and chain mail of medieval Crusader knights, with mostly white tabards.

"Who are you? And what are you doing in here?"

Fitzroy turned and found himself looking at a growing crowd of villagers. A Middle aged woman was standing in front and when she spoke again, Fitzroy realized she had been the one to speak before.

"What manner of witch or wizard are you in these clothes? Why are you here? What do you want?"

"I'd love to answer you, because then maybe you'd help. I'm just not sure how to answer the questions, because things have gone very weird lately. I mean my father murdered my mother for some sort of ritual. A guy calling himself the Witchdoctor tells my sister and I to run, find the Dreamer and the Walker, because apparently they can help. We find them, but that doesn't help, because they don't know much more than us. So we're running from these men in black and white suits. Then we're also running from this black hound thing. I managed to scare the hound off, but because of that, I can't stay focused. I think I passed out. Now I'm here."

The crowd was silent.

"I'm dead," Fitzroy said to himself, "I said the wrong thing, you're going to kill me."

Finally the woman in front spoke, "You are Mordred, but you have chosen to become the Kudavbin King."

"I don't know what you mean," Fitzroy said carefully and slowly, "My name is Fitzroy. Salt. I'm on the run with my sister and two guys named Marion and Harley who are apparently the Dreamer and the Walker. I don't know anything else, because nobody has told me anything else."

"You are the Kudavbin King, your sister is the Last Princess. Your sister is destined to lead the tribes back to freedom, to the old ways. You are destined to kill your father and end his reign of terror as the Locust King."

Fitzroy shook his head, "I really am dead," he said.

* * *

"Please be alive. Please be alive." Amy opened her hands and a tiny little blue butterfly fluttered into the sky. She watched it go in stunned silence.

"I did it. It's alive. I did it! let's see the freak do something like that! Hah!" She said and danced a little dance.

Grub clapped quietly, "Well done. You've created something new in the story. Remember, if you're going to work with me as a wizard, that wizards are agitators and saboteurs and con men."

"Con artists, thank you very much. Nobody is going to mistake me for a man." Amy interrupted.

"Con artists, that works too." Grub smiled. "The point is that we're like graffiti artists or comedians, we catch people off guard with misdirection and sleight of hand, and then hit them with magic where they're exposed."

"That sounds more like a stage magician." Amy said, still watching the butterfly.

"There's being a wizard and then there is being a magician. Being a wizard means magic and that means story. Being magician means misdirection and that means sleight of hand and illusion. Stage magic. All good magicians are wizards and all good wizards are magicians."

"Okay, fine. But we're still sitting on a park bench conjuring butterflies. And as amazing as that is, and it's pretty darned amazing, we still aren't doing anything to save my Harley. He might even be dead already."

"Little Miss, I don't want to take you into battle unable to protect yourself. The story does that to the main characters all the time these days, because the Locust King is in control of the story. The past is littered with the dead bodies of untrained characters: First Mothers who never raised anyone, First Heroes who did without ever being heroic, Dreamers and Walkers whose dreams and walks were cut very very short, Kudavbin Kings who mere could have been- but weren't. I am sending my apprentice into the fire without protection. And your boy is alive, I'd have felt the string snap if one of the storytellers were dead."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be from within the story. It's possible he's dead and somebody masked his death from me, but very unlikely. I'd bet real money that your boy's alive."

"Please be alive." Amy said quietly.

Verse Six: The Cold Wind Blows

"You never did tell us, how you found us." Harley said.

"You four are pulsing, radiating magic, or story essence if you prefer. Anyone in the game can find you."
Agnes answered.

"Why haven't the men of black and white found us here then?"

"It's a good bet that they have, but don't want to come in here. Linwich County is filled with old stories. The Primal One has walked these lands, so has the Great Serpent and his bastard offspring: Falsenight. The Pale Shepherd has shown up in stories here and some people say that Man of Void and Lady of Fire have been sighted here through the centuries. This is dangerous ground, like a minefield of powerful story elements."

"And you're living in it?" Harley asked.

"It keeps us safe from the Locust King. The False King isn't so bold as to send his troops in amongst so many old powers." Agnes nodded as she spoke.

"Wait, I thought Falsenight was on his side?"

"That doesn't mean the Locust King trusts that oily serpent for a second."

"You're avoiding the subject at hand again. When we started talking I asked what you wanted me to do. You've been avoiding it all week. At some point you're going to have to tell me."

"We want you to steal the holy grail, the cup of eternal life."

Harley raised an eyebrow, "As in King Arthur? And also as in the crucifixion? I have to admit that I was not expecting to hear that particular mythology intrude into this little acid trip."

"And you'd be right. It isn't the holy grail, it's what inspired those stories, or was grafted onto those myths to give them power."

"Like adding nitrous to an old car."

"To keep things clearly separate, let's call it by the name it has in our story: Falsenight's cup. The cup functions as a focus allowing people to draw upon Falsenight's power for a particular purpose."

"Immortality." Mildred breathed.

"Technically no. Technically it provided eternal life."

"There's a difference?" Harley asked.

"Immortal has a broader meaning that can include memory. Never being forgotten, living on in story, can be immortality. But Eternal Life means what it says, a more narrow meaning gives this cup more direct power. And that's what we're after."

"And this ancient mystic artifact is just sitting in that mining operation?"

"No, of course not. The mining operation is a symbol that Falsenight identifies with, fossil fuels are one of his favoured symbols."

"That doesn't make sense," Harley objected, "Fossil fuels are a non-renewable resource. They run out, how can they be a symbol of eternal life?"

Agnes shook her head, "They allow us to expand beyond natural boundaries, what else is eternal life besides a surpassing of natural boundaries?"

"And you want me to sneak in there and magically steal this magic cup or grail or whatever you call it?"

"You have the mystical perception of a tub of yoghurt. You couldn't see a ghost or god unless it fully manifested. No, you're sneaking in, but little mother will be finding the symbolic representation of Falsenight's cup and not you."

"Wait, you mean Maia? I can't believe what I'm hearing. She's a kid and you've repeatedly said that this is too dangerous for you ladies to go in, fully trained witches that you are. So it's too dangerous for a coven of witches but not for a nine year old girl?"

"And right now, she is still the Last Princess. And thus, like you she is one of the most powerful characters in the story. And unlike you she is perceptive to the story. You are all but blind to the story. He have to trip over it before you notice it."

"Then I'll take one of you, you're perceptive to the story."

"That's not our place in the story, it wouldn't work."

"Convenient. I don't know if I believe you."

"Believe me or not, this is how it has to be. We can't enter, and you can't find the cup on your own."

Maia looked at Harley solemnly, "You can count on me; Mr. Harley."

Harley shook his head, "I don't like the sound of any of this."

"You'll have to live with it if you want us to show you how to stop advertising everywhere you go. Once you leave Linwich County the King's Men aren't going to keep their distance from you any longer and you'll be running again."

"So basically, everything you've taught me so far has been parlour tricks; a distraction and not what I really needed?"

"Oh no. We taught you what you needed to get the cup. Once you've got the cup, we'll teach you what you need to escape detection, and also how to navigate in the Shadowlands so you aren't running blind."

"I don't like what I'm hearing, but I guess I don't have a choice."

It was nearly midnight as Harley drove the cricket back to the mining site and parked on the butte overlooking the ramshackle pile of metal and concrete building and huge looming metal silos. The coven arrived in a convoy of little cars and crowded in around the Cricket like sled dogs huddling together for warmth on a cold night.

Agnes coughed as she stepped up beside Harley. Harley turned to look at her, "So now what? You wish me well and throw me to the wolves?"

"Oh no, we're going to get you inside."

"And how are you going to do that? A magic key?"

"We're going to phase you a little further into shadow. The workers won't see you, you'll be free to work in the realm of the Dreamwalker and the Storyteller, the witch and the eldritch abomination."

"Cute." Harley said.

Agnes pinched Harley's ear sharply, "Oh, I'm not joking. Where things like Falsenight make their nests many other nasties congregate. Falsenight's nasty little spawn will be in there. Falsefangs we call them, nasty little serpent demons, your mace can handle them. It would be easier to deal with the humans, but I suspect you'd be squeamish about that sort of approach. And so, dropping you into darker shadows is the approach you're stuck with using."

Agnes began tracing arcane shapes with her long bony fingers and oily black wisps of smoke began to follow her movements. Then she pushed both hands forward abruptly and bathed Harley and Maia in the oily mist. Harley watched as colour bleed out of the world, desaturating until only the brightest colours were still noticeable.

"Congratulations. Now anyone not in the game won't see you. Hell, they won't feel you. You're functionally a ghost for the next few hours."

"Can I walk through walls?"

"No, just people who aren't awake. Now run along and get us that cup."

"It's wonderful to be your errand boy. So how am I getting through locked doors?"

"Be creative, you're a smart boy."

"And how will I know when I find the cup?"

"The little mother will know."

"You're a vile old woman for sending her in."

"Blame the story not the characters."

"No, I think I'll blame you."

"Suit yourself. The story doesn't care."

Once it was clear that nothing was going to change about the current situation, Harley and Maia slipped down to the building that Agnes had pointed out as the location.

"She said that people couldn't see us. Can they hear us Mrs. Harley?" Maia asked.

"That's a darned good question, Maia. I don't know. And while we're wondering about what the coven didn't tell us, can you sense this cup? Or feel it, I suppose? Or hear or anything else for that matter?"

"No, I don't what I would feel if I did."

"Typical. Let's keep it quiet unless they can hear us from here on. We'll need to sneak through when people open doors, so be ready."

The night shift seemed to consist entirely of security guards, and it wasn't hard to pass through open doors- and the guards themselves- as the guards proceeded on their rounds. Harley noticed as they went that Maia seemed to be increasingly on edge, her eyes darting rapidly to various points across the room. She didn't say anything and neither did he as they followed behind one particularly fat security guard. They wound around corrugate metal walls, and then down a flight of metal stairs- moving painfully slowly as they did. At the bottom they passed through a heavy metal door with a passcode entry and entered a concrete labyrinth of hard corners and walls painted white with yellow stripes that seemed to denote the direction of things only those who understood their secret code might decipher. Finally Maia grew so nervous that she began shivering visibly, and Harley touched her shoulder and gestured for her to wait. After the guard had lumbered out of ear shot Harley asked, "Is everything all right?"

"Mr. Harley, there's things and nasty stuff in here with us and I can kind of see them."

Maia watched as a pale hungry figure stalked through a wall hunting some phantom that Maia couldn't see. Another one chased nothing around the corner, crooked needle teeth barred and matted chalk hair flying in all directions. Maia watched the things charge through walls and up non existent hills until she realized that Harley was talking to her.

"I'm sorry Mr. Harley. What did you say?"

"What do you see Maia? I need to hear it from you. Whatever it is, I can't see it."

"Pale People monsters with big teeth and white hair." Maia said, "I don't think they're here and I mean like here here. It looks like they're a movie projection and stuff and they don't seem to see us and they're moving through wall and in the air and chasing things I can't see. I don't think they're real."

"If I'm hearing you right, then I'm betting that they are real. They just aren't in this world. You're probably seeing some sort of bleed over, the same way Marion and Fitzroy did. So either, we need to watch to keep you in this world, or there's a natural bleed here," Harley paused, "Although what that would be or mean I don't know. Either way, something's affecting you or something's affecting this place that you're seeing. Any of this mystic ability to recognize this cup we're after yet?"

Maia didn't answer immediately, and so Harley gently touched her shoulder again, "Anything else bothering you?" He asked.

"Well, I can feel two other things. I can feel something behind us and its following us and its like a lot of things and its kind of like a pack of wolves or something, 'cause it's really hungry. And over to the left down the hall is something else. And its kind of two things and one isn't alive I don't think and one is alive I think but it's kind of wrong. "

"And to the right?" Harley asked.

"Nothing. Quiet."

"Well, maybe what's behind us is the hound. Maybe it went back for reinforcements. Maybe the men of black and white grew a pair and decided to come and get us in here. And maybe its something else. But either way, I'm going to ignore that for the moment. And if there's nothing to the right, then we take the left hand path. One thing is bothering me though. I haven't seen any of those Falsefang things Agnes mentioned."

"I have," Maia said and pointed at a black wet smear in the shape of a large boa constrictor imprinted on the concrete wall.

Harley looked where Maia pointed and then looked back at her, "I don't see anything."

"Something killed it." Maia said, "I've been seeing them since we got in."

"Tell me as soon as you see anything weird then. I don't like the idea that something is killing the nasties. It doesn't sound good to me."

Maia nodded and they proceeded cautiously down the hallway heading towards the source of Maia's feelings. They twisted and turned through concrete hallways. They passed through what was clearly a cafeteria and Maia picked up a paper cup and waved it at Harley.

"I didn't know we could touch things." Harley said.

"They did only say that we couldn't pass through the doors." Maia noted, " But it is hard to hold onto it and it keeps wanting to fall through my hand. Maybe we could tell them this is the cup they're looking for and it looks this way because it's disguised or something."

"If I thought that would work, I'd do it." Harley said.

They continued on. Harley noted the piping overhead and on the upper walls seemed to be converging, more pipes emerging from openings and joining the bundles snaking along the path they were taking. Everything leading towards whatever was down this path. The path ended at a large metal door with a metal wheel to open and close it.

"It's through there." Maia said quietly.

"Well, there's nobody nearby to open it for us, so how do we get through?" Harley asked.

At that moment the wheel began to turn. Slowly and with great screeching wails of resistance the wheel twisted on its axis.

"Why do I get the distinct sense that this is not a good thing?" Harley asked.

The wheel stopped turning and the door began to open outward and an enormous shape emerged from behind the door. The thing was wrapped in a pale yellow robe with a deep hood that hid the face, if it had a face, and a long ragged train that dragged upon the ground as the thing advanced. the robe was trimmed with ornate but worn and threadbare gold threading. The shape beneath the robe seemed less like a human and more like some great colony of many small creatures, as though earthworms had learned to move as one great being, imitating the men who walked upon them for so long. The thing did not seem to take steps so much as wash forward like progressive waves upon the shore. It tilted its head

as the blackness of the hood faced towards them, and Harley suddenly knew what an worm on the sidewalk after a rain felt like.

"Mr. Harley," Maia said, "I see something weird."

"I see this one Maia. I think we're past weird."

The things began to roil towards them. As it moved it spoke in a voice the seemed made of many sounds, none of them an actual human voice. It seemed to speak by conducting a horrible symphony from the sounds of thousands of slithering bodies.

"I'm beginning to think that if this is the best you monkeys can manage, that there aren't likely to be any humans in the new world I am creating." The figure said as it approached, "Perhaps squid will do better? Highly intelligent, distributed intelligence as well, very interesting. Perhaps cetaceans? Maybe another primate species. We'll see. But humans? You're embarrassing yourselves. The last ten thousand years have been a definite low point for your species. And this is how you seek to end that time of darkness? Disappointing."

Harley grabbed Maia as the robed thing washed towards them in rhythmic waves. He nodded to her, trying to be reassuring.

"What is it?" She asked, her voice wavered and Harley was reminded that- for all her competence- Maia was still a nine year old girl.

"More storybook nightmares from the sounds I'm hearing under that cape. So I suspect we should be running." "We do an awful lot of running." "Yes we do."

They hurtled down the concrete halls of the building retracing their original route, only to arrive at the heavy metal door that required the passcode entry.

"He's still coming Mr. Harley. I think he has the thing they want too."

"Of course he does, and I have the distinct sense that no mace is going to stop whatever he or it is. Okay, fine. I'm supposed to be the Walker right?"

"You are the Walker. The Witch Doctor told me so."

"I've never met this Witch Doctor. But if Marion is the Dreamer and he gets prophetic dreams. Then as the Walker, maybe I can do something related to walking. They've already taught me seven league walking, and its supposed to work even when you can't see where you're going."

"Mr. Harley, you couldn't go through stuff during the whole time they were teaching you."

"I agree with you Maia. But here's the thing. We're about to get caught and I don't know what happens then, but I highly doubt it's pleasant. I don't see any way out except walking through some walls. So we are going to walk out and hope that me supposedly being the Walker somehow makes it work this time."

"I don't like that plan. I want another." "The other plan's are wait for the monster in the robe or wait for the monster in the robe. Which one sounds best to you?"

"I don't like any of them. They aren't nice."

"No they aren't. I'm willing to listen to any other options."

Maia was silent for a moment and then she whispered, "Keep moving, Keep Walking. Little steps."

Harley nodded and took her hand and together they stepped towards the metal door as though it didn't exist.

* * *

The coven edged forward. Lady Purge waved a hand to open the door before them and they proceeded cautiously to the top of a metal stair way leading in to the depths. As the women assessed the path in front of them Harley and Maia came rushing up the stairs and crashed into the women.

"What are you doing here?" Harley said, "Pack of wolves... No, pack of Jackals!"

"Why are you coming back?" Agnes Bladder demanded and then she looked past Harley down the stairs and gasped, "It is the Pale Shepherd," Agnes Bladder breathed the words out, her body radiating raw terror.

Harley looked back and confirmed that somehow the thing was still behind them and closing the distance. He looked around for options and noticed Maia still holding the paper cup. He grabbed it from her, almost losing it as the cup tried to pass clean through his hand. The thing in the robes reached the stairs. Harley focused, gripped the cup and then shoved it into Agnes' hands. "There's your cup. Now run."

And with that Harley and Maia ran straight at the nearest metal corrugated wall. Harley gripped Maia's hand, probably a little too tight, but he didn't dare risk losing her midway. He focused on his mantra:

"Keep moving, Keep Walking. Little steps." Harley was grateful that Maia wasn't questioning him. He tried not to flinch as they hit the wall. And suddenly were on the other side stumbling with the abrupt change in terrain and loose soil and grass sent both of the crashing to the ground. Harley spat out a mouthful of clover and mud and looked at Maia.

"I knew you were the Walker Mr. Harley and you walked us through a wall that time and before that you walked us all invisible and stuff and it was awesome!"

"So, from what I'm hearing, you're okay?"

"I'm amazing!" Maia grinned.

"Good, now let's run before that thing deals with the witches and comes after us."

"Do you think they'll be okay?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. They sent us in there, and they had to know what was there. or at least the risk. So I don't care what happens to the them."

* * *

Inside the building the Pale Shepherd spoke, "Servants of my sister? Why would you chase the cup? Don't you understand what it is? No of course you don't or you wouldn't chase it, at least not to have it or use it. You have been the resistance so long that you are dependent upon the empire that you resist to give you purpose. No. You will never be free because you are now defined by your opposition. You are incapable of creating a new world. You are useless."

"We have the cup, you cannot stop us with this power." Agnes said, holding out the paper cup."

"It seems the young story teller is better at painting stories than you thought. Look at your prize again, see it for what it is."

Agnes looked down at the cup, and quickly passed a hand over it in three circles and then gasped and dropped the cup.

"You could have changed the world, but no. Your vision was too small. I will admit that you have done an admirable job in your role as the resistance, but of course I have no use for resistance. It is time for a change and I am all about change, and your would have no place in the new world, so wedded are you to your battle and your silly little resistance movement. You have no idea what victory looks like. Perhaps you will be more open to change in your next lives. For the moment though, you will have to settle for merely feeding the future, rather than creating it."

Behind the Pale Shepherd things moved, a crowd emerged from the protection of the shadows, large creatures slick with moisture began to line up behind the robed figure known as the Pale Shepherd. The creatures were larger than a person and vaguely bipedal with huge distended bellies and muscular arms. They seemed to be at once both black as oil and yet they shimmered with an iridescent golden sheen. Their forms were serpentine in origins but dramatically twisted with features that seemed to allude to some chimeric goat-like heritage. But despite all this, the faces or the heads were most shocking, because the creatures had no skull or head in a traditional sense, instead having a mass not unlike tentacles, but flattened and appearing like the peeled skin of an orange flexing and unravelling as the things moved.

The Pale Shepherd gestured back with a vaguely hand-like appendage, and a few bits of the shepherds hands dropped to the ground in long wriggling strands.

"These are my Midwives. I grew them from fragments of Falsenight's power that you attempted to steal." The Pale Shepherd said, his voice formed from the sounds within the robe, like thousands of layers of wet silk rubbing together.

Agnes Bladder shook head, "We aren't interested in Falsenight's powers, we sought only his cup."

"Then you are fools." The Pale Shepherd responded, "In any event. I have taken the power that you sought, in ignorance it seems now. I have made it my own. You have lost. Your power cannot stand against mine of course."

"We are of the story. We are the resistance to the Empire. We oppose the ten thousand years of darkness. We are the wild one of wooded places. With the Wizards, we serve the story and draw power from the Primal One."

"And it seems now that your patron has abandoned you. Perhaps because you erred so badly. How long have you accepted the role of resistance? That is not your place in the story. Perhaps next time you will do better."

"We are not powerless Shepherd. We will not fall like wheat before the scythe."

"And you even use his symbols in your speech, why you're practically domesticated." The Shepherd's words slithered across the coven, and a few of them shivered. Lady Purge, who was standing at the back, took several steps backward as the conversation began to draw out. Her face wore an expression of a small viper confronted by an enormous crocodile.

"We are the wild places! We run free!" Agnes spat back her words towards the pale robes before her.

"Perhaps not fast enough to avoid the sheepdog, and now it seems not fast enough to avoid the wolf." Lady Purge turned and ran. The Pale Shepherd did not respond, and the rest of the coven did not notice. The Pale Shepherd continued to speak in his weird shuffling voice, "You attempted to use a group of queens as pawns and it has cost you dearly. You have spent so much time as captive enemies, nibbling at the empire's toes like a lapdog who resents her dinner than you have allowed your power to atrophy. There is so little left, I don't even know if there is a point in devouring you. But still. It is time for change, and I am change, and am adaptation, I am transformation and regeneration. And if there is to be space on the board for a new world, the old one must be cleared away."

Agnes Bladder began to frantically summon up coils of black oily smoke with her long sinewy fingers, other witches were likewise trying to summon up some manner of defence. Lady Purge ran without looking back.

"You have proven that you are not able to transform yourselves, and so that process falls to me. I doubt this was how you imagined that things would end. But then lack of imagination seems to be a problem for you. And in this game, that is a critical weakness."

The Midwives closed in.

Lady Purge ran frantically through the corridors, ignoring the sounds behind her. Hallways echoed with screams and horrifying banging and crunching sounds. She rammed her wizened body through doorway after doorway, leaving her bruised and sore. She burst out of the building on the south side and turned towards the cars. She could see Harley and Maia climbing into their van. Off to her left another door opened, and the Pale Shepherd exited the building. Lady Purge turned away and abandoned her car to run rather than face the pale Shepherd.

The Pale Shepherd saw he leave and did nothing. instead it watched from a distance as Harley started the Cricket and drove into the distance, leaving behind the coven's armada of cars.

The Pale Shepherd whispered with the voice of worms, "The story has an answer, and the story will go on. There is no death if you know the secret. Death is merely a change of clothes that one puts on as fashion changes. Death is change, and change kills death. And everything is new once more."

Verse Seven: Good Dog

"So as far as you can tell, this is a frame up job?" Bridger asked carefully, chewing on the words with visible displeasure.

"You didn't hear it from me, don't you know." Dwight Cutter said from across the table of the Murdock Automat Breakfast Diner, "But whenever somebody rich is dirty, then somebody poor gets taken to the cleaners, am I right?"

Bridger shook head and then spooned some watery tomato soup into his mouth, "So what do you think happened, based on what you know?"

"Well Harley is a stand up guy, you know? He's reliable and reasonable and you could count on him. That's the truth. Harley wouldn't hurt a kid, you know? There are those people who do the right thing no matter what it cost them, am I right?"

"I know the type." Bridger answered.

"Harley was that type. So these guys looking like you all suits and badges show up, and then start planting stuff in Harley's desk at, like, one in the morning. You know that's dirty, am I right? And there I was shredding documents. Harley is a good guy, you know? I'm just okay. Because, there I am. And I'm pretty sure the documents are dirty, you know? So they could totalling use me as a scapegoat, but there they are planting stuff in Harley's desk, and everyone knows Harley is a good guy. Wouldn't it make more sense to frame somebody like me, who is actually doing the dirty work. That makes more sense doesn't it? Am I right?"

"Did you know his friend? Marion Day?"

"Only a little. He was spacey, but I always got a good feeling from him, and you have to trust your gut, am I right? He meant well, he just didn't know when to keep his mouth shut, you know? Couldn't stop speaking truth to power, and I mean, how often does that end well?"

"To confirm, you don't believe either of them is capable of what they've been accused of doing? And you believe that, based on what you have seen relating to your job that they are being framed: the closing of Pandora and the subsequent federal investigation and Salt and Sons filing for bankruptcy?"

"You're sharp, Agent Bridger, don't miss a thing, that's exactly right. Too many weird things, it doesn't add up, don't you know. Mrs. Salt murdered, the kids go missing, the business goes sour and feds move in. And people are blaming two nobodies and not Mr. Darius Salt, how does that make sense?"

Special Agent Bridger looked down at the watery tomato soup in front of him. He wasn't hungry anymore.

* * *

Amy stared at the shattered front door leading in to Mrs. Trilby's Apartment. The door had exploded inwards, and the wood was charred. Amy could smell oil and sulphur in the air. She didn't move. Grub tapped her shoulder gently with a finger.

"So kid, is it safe?"

"I knew Mrs. Trilby." Amy said, "I liked her. Everyone liked her. Does this have to be a lesson? Can't you just tell me if she's okay?"

"Because you are entering midway through the story, and the plot is already moving." Grub answered, "If I don't train you hard, you're going to wind up dying heroically to move the story, and I have bigger plans for you. Me and Mung Bean are more than wizards, we have higher allegiances."

"What does that mean?"

"True stories are old. And they are part of an established mythology. Characters appear in multiple stories. Sometimes they're the hero, sometimes they're the mentor or the villain or the victim or just there to move the plot along. We aren't the heroes of this story. But there is another story, a bigger story- and we're the heroes of that. Or we were. Now we're old and tired and sooner or later, we're going to lose. And if we lose, that's a big problem. So we need an apprentice, pass the mantle on so we can be mentors and give somebody else the story."

"And that's why you want me?" Amy asked, "You want to hand your story off to me?"

"Yup, and it will hopefully save your life for you, because otherwise you wouldn't last very long in this story. Named but without any power in the plot. Not a good place. At least with us you can be a wizard." Grub said, and Mung Bean huffed heavily in agreement at his feet.

"Is that what happened to Mrs. Trilby? Named in the story, but no power?"

"Not even close. Mrs. Trilby was a witch, and a damn good one. Still is too, provided she survived."

"So what got her killed then?" Amy asked.

"Are you sure she's dead?"

"Okay, fine. Why did they attack her then?"

"Witches are a powerful variable, a wild card in any deck. In any war amongst the civil folk, there are generally two sides. They do like dichotomies after all, black and white to keep the sides and the story simple. Simple is easier to control, and the civil folk are all about control. The civil folk take all stories and their many shades of grey and they force them to be black or white, bad or good, vile darkness or pure virtue. But all their virtues are about giving up. Obedient and submissive, faithful and trusting. No wonder they like dogs and sheep, not cats and goats."

"You have a dog." Amy felt incredibly small, and although the statement seemed silly, she had wanted to say something. Hearing her own voice helped remind herself that she still existed.

"I'm a wizard," Grub answered, "And so is Mung Bean. We play with the enemy's weapons. But you missed the key point. It all comes back to control. The Civil folk want control, and anything they can't control is an enemy, but in the old times there were many peoples and many stories and some were good and some were bad and many many more were in the middle, and people weren't afraid of the Grey. And the good often worked with the bad, because the bad had a right to exist just like the good. As long as you didn't break the great laws, nobody would seek to destroy your story. But the civil folk don't like or understand that kind of nonsense. There's only one acceptable story to the civil folk, and unless your story fits within their narrow definition, then you must be destroyed utterly.

"Oh."

"Also, she was talking to your guy's best friend and giving him back up when he was neck deep in bad stuff and they traced the line back to her like a spy movie. Now, reach out with your empathy and tell me if Mrs. Trilby and her cats survived."

"She had a lot of cats." Amy remembered.

"Witches tend to as a rule. Did you ever stop to wonder why cats are magic, but dogs generally aren't? Did you ever stop to wonder why witches live alone in the wild places and why dogs aren't normally magic, but wolves and coyotes generally are? Magic requires three things to work: intelligence, a sense of story, and wildness. Virtually every predator is intelligent enough to be magical. And predators that hunt are generally able to predict the future through stories, its how they catch their prey. But of the domestic predators, like dogs and humans, only tend cats retain their innate wildness. Domestication makes us slaves and drains magic from the world."

"I thought science did that?"

"Science is just magic deconstructed, like reading a pile of blueprints to understand the layout of a building. Science doesn't drain magic, science is the schematic for how magic works. No, it's domestication- that need to control beings that drains the magic from the world. The loss of your personal agency turns you from a magician into somebody else's pawn. Mrs. Trilby has been in the game along time. Most witches start when they're teenagers, so any witch that hits Mrs. Trilby's age has a lot of story time on her side."

"Where does that leave people and dogs?"

"Even a dog will bite its owner's hand if beaten enough times. Domestication isn't a death sentence, just a prison. Now you're stalling. So take a look, the plot is moving faster. They're trying to remove allies from the board to leave your guy and his crew without back up. That means there's a clock ticking and even we could be on their hit list. So reach out and show me the magic."

* * *

Special Agent Bridger leaned over the greasy counter to glare at the rotting parsnip of a boy with the blond dreadlocks and the Bob Marley t-shirt.

"I think you better try again. 'I don't remember yesterday' is not an acceptable answer. I can shut down this little grow-op of yours in a millisecond." Bridger growled.

"No way man. I am, like, the Johnny Cash of Cannabis Seed supply. It's all legal. I walk the line. You can't touch me with your badge and your bullshit."

"Shut up!" Bridger snarled, the marijuana stench was giving him a headache and not helping his patience, "What you're doing isn't legal, you've just stayed quiet enough and polite enough that nobody is willing to take time away from bigger threats to step on your illegal little sandcastle. And even if what you were doing was legal, are all of your permits up to date? Have you leapt through all the legal hoops you're required too have leapt through? Because I can tell you that you haven't. I don't know what you've missed, but I've never met a person or business who hadn't broken some laws I could arrest them for eventually. There are just too many laws to follow all of them and some of them are contradictory. So if I want to ruin your life, it's just a matter of me deciding that it's worth my time to do it. You are guilty, because there's no room in the system for you to be innocent and still get by. So the question that keeps you safe is not 'Have I broke the law?' but, 'Have I pissed off Special Agent Bridger?'"

The greasy parsnip swallowed and Bridger sensed that he might understand that being baked would not prevent Bridger from cooking his goose.

* * *

Grub and Amy picked their way through the shattered war zone that was the remains of Mrs. Trilby's apartment, while Mung Bean watched the door. Scorch marks decorated most surfaces, weird circular indents dotted the walls, bullet holes played connect the dots across the floor and the ceiling and all of the windows were blown out.

"What's wrong with this picture?" Grub asked looking at Amy.

Amy's head was spinning. Conjuring butterflies was one thing and kind of awesome to do, 'CSI: Once Upon a Time' was another thing entirely. She tried to take it all in, but now that she was sensing the place magically, this was a problem. She could see bits of the violence in frozen empathic snapshots: Mrs. Trilby summoning hoards of little monsters from ridiculous cross-stitched summoning circles hung all over the room. Psychic photos of little black demonic cats clawing their way out of picture frames to swarm men dressed like a bad episode of X-Files. Flashing images of her cats mounting their own defences, running along walls and ceilings and playing with gravity to launch themselves like cannonballs at the enemies- leaving the weird circular dents in the walls as they did. Amy's head swam with the images, and she nearly fell over from the vertigo the experience caused her. She stumbled to a damaged and leaking kitchen sink and unceremoniously threw up.

She wiped her mouth and fished out a mostly intact mug. She didn't dare play with the faucet and so collected the leaking water until she had enough to rinse out her mouth.

"Everything is wrong with this picture. This is not sexy, this is not okay!" She managed.

Grub shook his head, "What's wrong is what's missing."

Amy looked at him in confusion, "Mrs. Trilby and her cats are missing, but the guys in suits could have just taken them."

Grub shook his head again, "Even if they took Mrs. Trilby, if she'd lost a battle like this, they shouldn't have been able to take all of her."

Amy's eyes widened, "There's no blood! For either side!"

"The Men of Black and White don't generally bleed, unless the plot requires it. They aren't people. They are embodiments of force and coercion and fear of the unknown. Mrs. Trilby and her cats on the other hand, should bleed if injured."

"So does that mean, they're okay?"

"It means that they are unaccounted for, and that is worrying. The plot is progressing. And if they don't win this time, I fear Mother of Discord will just devour us entirely."

"Mother of Discord?"

"Mother of Discord is one of those Old Ones I talked about earlier, the powerful forces in the background. She is the game clock in this case. Because if the Locust King wins too many times, eventually she will just clear the board. Only in this case, the board is life on Earth."

"She's like the devil or something?"

"No. She is the paradox. She is the rise of complexity and life, but the inevitability of heat death and entropy. She is the closest thing the universe has to a grim reaper, but it was she that made life possible in the first place. Although she did not create us, she made us possible. Life is not special to her. She likes black holes and Dark Matter as much as she likes life and habitable solar systems. People make this mistake all of the time. They imagine that devils and demons and gods and angels must be good or evil, malignant or benign. They are not. They are indifferent, they are beyond and outside our understanding and we are beneath them. We are as significant to them as the common cold is to us; noticeable on occasion due to effects, but invisible individually."

"And they will kill us with a wipe of a cosmic facial tissue."

A chuckle.

"Precisely."

* * *

"Marion was a good guy. He was cool." Burt said as he munched on a coffee shop scone, "He didn't deserve the way Wheately sold him up the river, but hey, Wheately is a piece of work so what would you expect? That guy- Darius Salt- was not nice to his wife and he was not nice to his kids. I see people like that all the time when I volunteer at with the cub scouts. Dads like that have kids and wives with strange bruises nobody likes to talk about, that's what these guys do."

"You don't think Darius Salt was a good person? You only met him for a moment."

"I'm a security guy, it's not cool if I can't suss a guy out pretty quick. And I know the bad dad. I have to set bad dads straight when I'm in cub scout leader mode way too often, but there at least I got power. I can tell those guys that it don't matter what they do at home, if I catch treating people wrong under my watch, they will regret it. I didn't have power with this Darius Salt guy, couldn't do a thing and he walked all over his wife and his kids and poor Marion. It wasn't fair, and now Darius Salt is missing, probably in Barbados or somewhere with a nice tax shelter and Marion's on the run and that ain't fair either."

"You're confident your former coworker is innocent?"

"I'd think that Wheately framed him if I thought Wheately had the pull. But maybe somebody with more pull didn't like his toes getting stepped on."

"Darius Salt?"

"You said it, not me."

Verse Eight: The Cave of the Weaver

Harley leaned back into the cracked faux leather seat and stared across the steering wheel at Big Mack's front window and the closed sign on the front door. He sighed, "They never never taught us how to find the Witch Doctor. For all that trouble, we haven't heard anything new."

Maia looked up at him, "You can walk now and you can use that Boneshaker thing and stuff."

Harley listened and then nodded, "True, we have new skills. But we don't know how to find the Witch Doctor. We've lost our guides to their own treachery. And we have a new horrible nightmare creature that is apparently chasing us, or at least enjoying the process of tormenting us- I'm not sure yet. And Marion and Fitzroy are still out."

"Marion hasn't talked much lately, has he?" Maia asked.

"You noticed that too, huh?" Harley said and Maia nodded.

"Yeah. Do you think he's okay?" Maia asked.

"If he's in anywhere near the same situation as we are, he's probably fighting for his life."

They sat silently for a long moment. Harley knew that nothing he'd said was likely to sound comforting to Maia, but he didn't know what else to say. He wasn't about to lie so that things would sound better, that never helped in the long run. So he sat silently, and Maia obliged by sitting silently as well.

A tap on the driver side window jolted them both back to attention and nearly gave Harley an aneurysm. He looked out the window to see Big Mack grinning wildly at him. Harley muscled the window down.

"You're still alive! And you've got all your bits! Any unholy tattoos or curses I should know about?" She asked.

"I can walk through walls and summon a mythical morning star. Does that count?" Harley asked.

Big Mack blinked and her mouth opened, then closed. Finally she said, "I'm not sure whether to laugh or ask if you're serious."

"Let's go with laugh." Harley said, "I don't know if I'm serious these days."

"Generally when the Coven wants to talk to you it's serious all right. Serious trouble. I wasn't expecting to ever see you again. I figured for sure they'd take you out to the Spider Stones. And well, that would be it. Folk don't come back from the Spider Stones, at least not in one piece. Or normal and sane."

"You know that they're witches?" Maia asked, leaning across the seat to look at Big Mack.

"Everyone knows they're witches in this town and everyone is afraid of the witches. People go missing who cross them. That fracking set up was a scary thing to watch go up. Inspectors and lawyers and all sorts of outside folk would show up, and the coven didn't like it. And then somebody else would show up to find out what had happened to this lawyer or that inspector. I'm amazed that they got the thing built at all, for all the good it'll do them."

"What do you mean? I thought you said they just had a big grand opening party?"

"yeah, but the company that's financing the drilling, Salt and Sons, they just filed for bankruptcy protection and there's a securities commission investigation on one of the other businesses, Pandora something or other."

"I've heard of it." Harley said slowly.

"So yeah, the operation is officially open, but with the price of oil so unstable and the company providing the money falling apart at the seams, nobody is sure if the place will actually do anything. And we're all pretty sure that the coven did it. They're probably behind the missing kids too. That's why I was so worried when they took an interest in you guys."

"People think that the coven is making children disappear?"

"That's the rumour, not like anybody will say it to their face though. hey, did you want breakfast? I assume that's why you're lurking outside my restaurant this early. I'll get you some food and tell you about it while I get the place ready to open."

Inside the Diner, Big mack busied herself setting up the free standing tables and laying down table clothes and turning on appliances and generally getting things ready. Harley noted the absence of any other employees, but decided not to mention it. Big Mack started on a trucker's breakfast of sausage and bacon and eggs for Harley and quickly had a scrambled egg and hash browns breakfast for Maia.

"So," Harley said, sitting back into a booth where he could watch Marion and Fitzroy, "Missing Children?"

"Not like, little kids, you know?" Mack said as she bustled around, "More like teenagers, but some as young as twelve or so. They just don't come home generally. It think we're up to somewhere around two dozen. Nobody knows for sure, but the kids general got seen talking to a member of the coven before they disappeared into the ether."

"Did anyone go to the police?"

"Oh yeah, but nobody found anything. Like they just up and walked away."

"And you guys suspect the coven, because they're creepy and the kids were heard talking to them before they disappeared?"

"Well and one other thing. One kid always wore a baseball cap that was found near the Spider Stones. That was enough for the Sheriff to bring in the whole coven for questioning, but nothing else surfaced and just because you know it was them, doesn't mean you can prove it."

"What are the Spider Stones?" Maia asked.

Mack looked up from her work and her expression made Harley think Mack now regretted mentioning the stones, "They're a circle of eight standing stones outside town. They're called the Spider Stones because laid out to make them look like a spider constellation. Built on private land owned by some corporation, everything is anonymous. The Corporation isn't public, so the town couldn't find out who owns it. The company is called Weaver Public Works and Services. Seems designed to sound innocuous. I know a wolf in sheep's clothing when I see it."

Maia cautiously pointed off away from the fracking site to the other side of town, "Are the stones over there?"

Mack turned to look, and Harley could see her calculating from their expressions, "That looks right, yeah. Did you see them earlier? I thought you folks came in from the other side of town?"

"Mr. Harley," Maia said softly, "I can feel them from here, and I think there's something there."

"You aren't seriously going out there?" Mack asked, "You just walked away from the coven untouched, and now you're going to the stones?"

"Oh, we're already touched," Harley said, "I think you're right Maia, this is our only lead. We should investigate."

"I'm going to tell you again that you shouldn't." Mack said, "That isn't a good idea."

"These days, nothing we do is a good idea." Harley answered.

The Spider Stones, Mack had explained after being pressed, were behind a set of billboards on the side of the road. It took Harley less than five minutes to drive the Cricket out to the site in question.

Harley and Maia stepped cautiously out of the Cricket and walked carefully around the three billboards mounted along the highway, apparently designed to hide the bizarre landmark behind them. behind the

billboards they found eight standing stones, not as large as Stonehenge, but substantially taller and wider than Harley. They appeared to be cut from a black limestone and were erected radiating out from a central point that had been carved into a circular depression and partially filled with quartz pebbles that then radiated out into eight lines that circled around the stones and came back to conclude at the depression. The whole effect made the name: Spider Stones abundantly clear.

Maia felt the ground open up around her and the void spread beneath. She felt herself falling and looked up to see the stones above her as she disappeared into the darkness. As she fell she could hear Harley's voice, "Oh come on. Not again. I can't carry all three of them by myself."

Maia felt herself settle into the cold of the void and in the void she felt the familiar strands of spider webs spreading into infinity in all directions.

"At last," The voice said, stretching the vowels like violin strings the darkness, "Little mother has arrived. I greet you little mother. You are finally all here and now your initiation into this new cycle begins. It has been a long time. We have missed you."

"You're the Weaver again." Maia said carefully.

"I am still the Weaver and I am always the Weaver. Just as you are still and always First Mother, no matter how many times you are called upon to play that role."

"I'm not a mother. My mother is dead."

"The death of the old mother is a recurring part of the False King's story. He must destroy the mother to give dominance to the false father."

"Are you going to help me?"

"I am going to offer you a deal. The same deal that I always offer you. I will help you find your way in the story. I shall give you power. In exchange, you shall weave my stories for me, and weave me back across the cultures of the land. You shall resurrect me and give me new life."

"Is this like the stuff with the witches and how they got power from the thing they called the Primal one. That kind of stuff?"

"Very much so. And though I do not wish to degrade the Primal One, my dear niece. I am much more than she and you are much more than her agents in the story. If we do this right, then you are one of the heroes of this tale, and heroes can bend a story like nothing else."

"What if we do it wrong?"

"Then the False King is the hero and things do not end well for you. And I scuttle back to my hole until the story finds you a new vessel."

"If I help you, will you help me find the Witch Doctor."

"I will indeed."

"If I help you, can I help save Fitz and Mr. Marion?"

"Right now? Yes. In the future, only the story knows."

"I don't like this plan. I want another."

"The story has been crippled, little mother. Good options have been torn from us like a lamb isolated from the flock by a pack of wolves. We have no good options. You can act or you can be a victim. Choose little mother."

"I don't like you."

"That is good."

"Is this what happened to the other children who disappeared? The ones who spoke with the coven and stuff?"

"The coven fed me discontented souls, young folk like yourself who were frustrated that the story they lived in offered them only servitude and eventual death. I do not know what the witches hoped to accomplish by this. I think they thought that they were paying me tribute."

"What did you do to them? Did you eat them or something?"

"I did something far worse. I told them about the old story and I taught them how to leave the False King's story behind. They are gone, because they left the False King's story behind, and most likely then entered the battlefield. I sense some of them out there still, fighting for a better story."

"Just some of them?"

"I will not lie to you little mother. You are my most trusted ally throughout our many tellings of the story. I wish you to be this again, and so you will receive only the truth. The vast majority of people who fight against the False King's story are dead. Most do not die quickly. Most do not die well. Many others could have filled your role. They are dead. But now here you are, and you must make your choice."

"I don't know. I'm just a kid."

"Your mother has died in vain then."

Maia's whole being shuddered, she could feel her hurt and her anger rippling out across the vast infinite web in the void around her.

"That wasn't far."

"The story so very rarely is fair. The False King took your mother from you to preserve his story. Our story wove her death into a sacrifice to save you, the First Mother who will restore the old story. You can let your mother be a casualty that the False King leaves in his wake. That is one story. Or you can fight to make your mother's death a noble sacrifice. It is not fair. She deserves more, but it is what he gave to her. What will you make of her death: casualty of war, or sacrifice for her children's future?"

"Fine, you have a deal. But I hate you."

"I understand, but it will do. Now let us be bound once more as we have always been and we will be again. Be my agent in the story, and bring the story back to the tribe. Arise First Mother and be whole again."

Maia felt something wrap around her, like threads or strands of spider web, but she could see nothing in the darkness. The strands bound her tightly, but did not restrain her, rather she felt them merge into her and become extensions of herself and of her awareness. She could project her awareness out into the vast darkness and feel other bits of the story. She could see other versions of what she recognized as

herself. The moment and the awareness overwhelmed her and she tried to cry out, but found herself unable to do even that. She gasped for air, and found that she seemed no longer to have a body or form at all. She was the threads and was lost within her own expanded awareness.

"You struggle little mother, but you will re-adjust, and then you will adapt and take back your tools." The Weaver paused, "Can you hear me little mother?"

Maia could hear the Weaver, but had trouble focusing her attention just upon the Weaver's words. She struggled and finally found her voice, "Yes. I don't like you, now." She managed.

The darkness chuckled and Maia could feel the Weaver's amusement radiate throughout the story, "But you seek the Witch Doctor. And the witchdoctor is a storyteller. Like your friends. The link between your Dreamer and Walker and the Witchdoctor is unbreakable."

"But Mr. Marion is still asleep and Mr. Harley can't see the witch road. Fitz could see the Witch Road, but he's out too and I don't know how to do that."

"You did it just fine when you fled from my nephew. And now I have reawakened your awareness of the whole of the story. It is yours and the Storytellers will teach you how to navigate this new home that I have given you."

"Who's your nephew?"

"The Pale Shepherd, and you could sense him. Simply do what you did there, but do so with your guides. You will find a line of thread stretching from them to your Witch Doctor and you can follow it to him."

"Why do I have to do it?"

"Because chance has dropped you into that part in the story. And now you must take your place in the story or die. You are mortal, but your character is not. The story alone is eternal, because the story is not bound by reality. The story is not bound by its medium. The story is information and information is free. All a story requires is a pattern and it can survive. The story is the only thing that escapes death and the only thing that may be transmitted from the death of one world into its newborn replacement. When Rome fell, stories survived. When Babylon fell, stories survived. No King or emperor from ancient times has survived to the modern era, but their stories have survived. Zeus and Odin and Isis and Aphrodite have found new worshipers in your modern era because their stories survived and they survived in stasis like divine water

bears in the void that exists when a story is not told, and each burst forth like a newborn phoenix when some archaeologist or would be Neo-Pagan again read their story and breathed new life into them."

"So is that my job? And why do I have to do it?"

"It is your job. And it is your job because of who you are. They always say that evil only has to win once. That good has to remain vigilant and never waver. But you know the big secret? They are wrong. The conditions for life exist everywhere. Life evolved around pitch dark deep sea vents. Life evolved in the inhospitable Eoarchean Era of Earth's history. Life was. As soon as life was possible and in all places where life could find even the tiniest foothold, life began and life continued."

"But what about the False King? I thought and I don't know, but isn't he destroying everything and stuff?"

"What about him? The Mayans found the False King and were just about done with his teachings by the time the Europeans arrived. The Anasazi and the Hohokam both learned the error of the Locust Path and walked away from it. Life is a self-cleaning system. They say evil has to win once, but they are wrong, evil has to corrupt every generation to such an extent that no rebellion can occur. Evil must overwhelm again and again, because if any hope survives and grow then Evil will be overthrown."

"Then why does it seem so hard?"

"Because it is hard. Evil fights to completely dominate, and when it does win, it hides all evidence that there was ever another way. But it is lying. And more importantly. It is not even evil, it is just self-destructive and afraid. But there is another way, and that other way always wins eventually. If you lose here today, you only lose this round."

"What does it mean to lose this round?"

"It means nothing changes until somebody else learns that there is another way. And if you fail loudly enough, you may spawn new rebellions. And so even in defeat you may be confident that you have done some good for tomorrow. But, and this is important, although the Locust King can only win in the short term, that short term can be quite long to human minds. The damage that the path of the Locust can do to the ecosystem can persist for generations and even millennia and the people who find the old path the Free Path may be a very different people on a very different planet, a much quieter planet than before. Life recovered after the Permian Extinction, but for nine of every ten things alive at the time, the Permian Extinction was the end of the story. And each time the Locust King get to tell his story, the human song

hangs in the balance and risks being silenced forever. The next people to walk the circle of the free path may not be human. So, the stakes are still very high, even if victory is inevitable."

"You're making people disappear and you're scaring parents and I lost my mom and I'm scared of my dad. Doesn't that make you a bad guy? And how can I trust you?"

"I'm not going to tell you why you should trust me. I don't want an agent who trusts me. We are beyond time and beyond your understanding. You breathe life into us, but we are beyond what you make of us. You would be a fool to trust me. I have given you what you asked, and I have told you many secrets. Perhaps this makes you think you should trust me. And so, to keep you from becoming too comfortably in the presence of an ancient spider god, I will not let you go."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that I am not sending you back to your little ragtag group with your hard won information. I am leaving you here, in my web, to find your own way back. You are my agent, or at least you will become so if you prove yourself worthy to be so. Good luck little mortal. Good luck little mother."